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Subject: New Glyphosate Report Endangers Future of Aerial Eradication Program

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Subject: New Glyphosate Report Endangers Future of Aerial Eradication Program

Summary

1. (SBU) On March 20, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), an entity of the World Health Organization (WHO), released the findings of a report that classified glyphosate, the principal herbicide used in Colombia's aerial eradication program, as a probable carcinogen. Although the IARC is widely respected in academic and medical circles, the report has been criticized on a number of fronts. Scientific merits aside, a variety of civil society and government actors here have called for a cessation of aerial eradication operations, and several Colombian entities with oversight authority are reportedly planning to recommend that aerial eradication be halted. Without aerial eradication, Colombia will be unable meet its coca eradication goals.

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World Health Organization Report Classifies Glyphosate as "Probably Carcinogenic"

2. (SBU) On March 20, the IARC, the specialized cancer research agency of the WHO, released its summary of a forthcoming report in which it classified glyphosate as "probably carcinogenic to humans." The two page summary, published in *The Lancet Oncology*, was compiled by an international panel of 17 experts and is based on the agency's review of a select body of scientific literature related to glyphosate. (Note: The full report and bibliography is not yet available but will likely be published in the coming months. End note). Aaron Blair, a scientist at the National Cancer Institute (an entity of the U.S. National Institute of Health [NIH]) who chaired the IARC panel, explained the panel's glyphosate classification, stating, "There was sufficient evidence in

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animals, limited evidence in humans and strong supporting evidence showing DNA mutations ... and damaged chromosomes."

3. (SBU) Officials from the Centers for Disease Control and NIH, who had access to the panel's deliberations, told INL officials that the IARC is considered an authority on carcinogens and that it's rigorous, "well established consensus-based review process" has been successful in previous carcinogen classifications, some of which were also controversial.

Media Coverage Intensifies

4. (SBU) News of the report spread rapidly. International media sources across the globe reported on the findings, in part due to the potential implications of such an assessment for countries that rely heavily on the world's most popular herbicide by volume. On March 22, the *Washington Post* published an article associating Colombia's aerial eradication program with a "cancer-linked" herbicide. In Colombia, despite an initial lull, media coverage and public reaction to the WHO report has gained momentum, most importantly through mainstream editorials that have called on the government to halt aerial eradication due to the alleged danger posed by glyphosate.

WHO Findings Not Universally Accepted

5. (SBU) The WHO's decision to classify glyphosate as a likely carcinogen is not without controversy. Monsanto, which invented glyphosate in 1970 and still markets the product under the Roundup label, reacted swiftly to the finding, calling it "inconsistent with decades of ongoing comprehensive safety reviews by the leading regulatory authorities around the world...." Through a press release, the company also attacked the report's methodology, noting that the IARC panel did not utilize the full body of scientific literature on glyphosate in its review. Other scientists and academics have also questioned the IARC's findings, citing potential problematic issues with the evidence and the failure of the IARC to account for the glyphosate's use under real world conditions, which often includes strict regulatory measures. Indeed, the IARC's panel chair himself noted in an interview that the IARC's mission is to perform hazard assessment by asking whether a substance causes damage "in some circumstance, at some level of exposure." The agency, he said, does not consider whether such circumstances or exposures actually occur in the real world, nor does it weigh benefits of using such chemicals against the risks.

Aerial Eradication Program Operates Under Strict Regulatory Control

6. (SBU) Understanding the real world conditions is important when evaluating the safety of the aerial eradication program. Like in the United States, Europe, and many other countries, the use of glyphosate for the aerial eradication of coca is governed by environmental and human safety protocols, as outlined in the Colombian government's Environmental Management Plan (EMP). The EMP, which is overseen by an interagency committee of technical experts, specifies procedures for ensuring that appropriate preventive measures are implemented and that, in the case of accidents, collateral damage is minimized. Complementing the EMP's operational guidelines are required procedures for investigating any environmental accidents or suspected affectations to human health. (Note: Since the inception of the EMP in 2003, not a single case of human health damage has been documented or verified. End note). An overview of the aerial eradication program, as well as a full accounting of its embedded safety protocols, can be found in REFTEL A.

7. (SBU) Apart from the EMP, the aerial eradication operations also comply with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations. The EPA recently reaffirmed the safety of the aerial eradication program in a letter to the Department of State, dated March 19, 2015, in which the agency concludes, "For effects to human health...

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glyphosate has low acute toxicity with slight to mild skin and eye irritation and does not cause systemic effects, carcinogenicity, significant reproductive or developmental toxic effects, including susceptibility of offspring, or neurotoxicity.” Furthermore, “While there are potential exposures to glyphosate residues to humans... from the use of glyphosate products, we concluded that these exposures do not result in risk of concern to all age groups, including pregnant women and children.” Based on its information and assessment, “...the EPA concludes that there are no risks of concern to people, including those involved in handling and application of the pesticide and those near treatment areas, provided the pesticide is used and applied according to the product label directions and restrictions.” In a desk statement issued following the IARC report, EPA noted it “reviewed over 55 epidemiological studies conducted on the possible cancer and non-cancer effects of glyphosate. Our review concluded that this body of research does not provide evidence to show that glyphosate causes cancer, and it does not warrant any change in EPA’s cancer classification for glyphosate.”

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Continued Aerial Eradication Vulnerable

9. (SBU) The WHO’s conclusions, regardless of whether or not they are scientifically valid, have potentially serious implications for the future of aerial eradication, given the already highly politicized nature of the public debate over the program. [REDACTED]

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If Aerial Eradication is Halted...

10. (SBU) A suspension of aerial eradication would seriously damage Colombia’s ability to meet its eradication goals. Manual eradication, the only alternative to aerial spraying, does not currently have the human or financial resources to fill the void, and developing such resources would take significant time, likely more than one year. Moreover, unless the Colombian military devotes additional resources to manual eradication operations – something it has been reluctant to do – the government would not have the ability to undertake

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operations in large parts of the country – precisely the areas with the highest concentration of coca – due to threats of violence from armed groups.

11. (SBU) Adding to these complications is the UNODC's upcoming release of 2014 coca estimations, expected to be published in June. These estimates are rumored to show a sizable increase in coca cultivation over 2013 numbers and will only further increase the pressure on Colombia to redouble its eradication posture. In the short term, however, the Colombian government would not be able to do this without the capability to target coca aurally.

Comment

12. (SBU) The designation of glyphosate as a "probable carcinogen" adds another serious threat to an already expansive list of threats against the aerial eradication program. Regardless of the validity of the WHO findings, the reaction -- local, regional, and international -- certainly has glyphosate's supporters on the defensive. Given growing political hostility in certain sectors toward aerial eradication, even prior to the release of the WHO report, any cessation of the program -- even if ostensibly temporary -- would call into question the viability of the program.

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Signature: WHITAKER

Drafted By: BOGOTA:Embury, Ben
Cleared By: STATE/INL:Copley, Robert E
 STATE/POL:McNamara, John T
 STATE/PAS:Bentley, Kathy A
 STATE/EXO:Ziff, Benjamin G
 STATE/INL:Andrews, Jorgan K
Approved By: STATE/EXO:Whitaker, Kevin
Released By: BOGOTA:Peterson, Karen L

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